

The Maasai East Africa's Most Celebrated Indigenous Peoples



The Maasai are East Africa's most celebrated indigenous peoples. Tall, dark and slender, they have for long remained contemptuous of modern lifestyle. They are a fearless, proud, and freedom loving people, who have always infatuated romantic Westerners, since the appearance of explorer Joseph Thomson's book "Through Maasailand" in 1885. Their interpreters to the world have included such gifted writers as Karen Blixen and Ernest Hemingway.

The Maasai are a pastoral tribes-group native to southern Kenya and north-central Tanzania, along the Great Rift Valley plains. They are great herders of cattle who live in the open wild, sharing their habitat with wildlife. They deem themselves as sons of enkai –a monotheistic God, who gifted them with cattle – in fact all the cattle in the world. With this certain knowledge, they do not associate cattle raids with any guilt, but more like a restoration to the rightful owners.

Thought to have originated from the Nile Valley in Sudan, the Maasai migrated southward sometimes between the 14th and 16th centuries, probably in search of greener pastures for their beloved cattle. Along the way, they fiercely fought and displaced tribes they encountered. Around the 18th and 19th centuries, these nomadic Maa speaking Nilotes settled in their present domains in Kenya and Tanzania.

News of the Maasai's military prowess travelled far and wide and Arab slave traders and European explorers avoided them. Their African neighbours feared them and to secure the peace, the more calculating established trade and marriage relations. The ascendancy of the Maasai over rivals at this time imbued them with an arrogance and belief in the correctness of their way of life that persists to this day.

From around the 1830's, Maasai strength was sapped by civil war. This internal weakness led to gradual loss of territory to long-suffering neighbours such as the Nandi and Kipsigis. With the arrival of the British in the late 19th century, the Maasai suffered a series of severe setbacks from which they have never fully recovered.

Around the decade 1880-1890, their cattle were ravaged by diseases such as rinderpest that saw herds diminish by about 80%. The human population was not spared either; an unholy combination of smallpox, cholera and famine brought down the population from about 500,000 to 40,000.

Thoroughly weakened, the Maasai succumbed -after some attempts to resist, to the British plan to settle over the best of their lands. The 1904 Maasai Agreement saw to the loss of two thirds of Maasai territories. This was followed by forced relocations to the mostly marginal lands they occupy today.

Throughout British rule, various devices- such as a levy on Maasai cattle during World War II, were employed to limit their demands for land. The departure of the British from Kenya in 1963 did not

result in any significant restoration of their land rights, but indeed brought about further losses, such as that which came with the establishment of the Maasai Mara game reserve. They did not fare any better in Tanzania.

Today, scattered populations of Maasai can be found in Kenya in Naivasha, Laikipia and regions south of Nairobi including Narok and Kajiado, and the Trans-Mara region bordering Tanzania. Tanzania's Maasai population can be found at Serengeti, Ngorongoro and Mondulai, as far as Arusha, and the Maasai Steppe area south of Pangani River. Still, 80% of these areas are reserved for wildlife conservation.

Traditional Maasai society had no centralised political structures, and governance relied heavily on the age-set system. Among men, there were pre-adolescent herds-boys, warriors and the elders –each with a team leader. The senior elders sat on top of the heap; they were paramount and their decisions final. The women and children fell under the male head of the home. In addition, a laibon - a spiritual leader with grand powers, including healing, divination and prophecy, presided over religious matters and determined when to wage war.

Ownership of cattle is the key measure of a man's wealth and status. The more cattle a man has, the more wives he may marry. This in turn leads to more wealth by way of children, for children are another measure of wealth. Indeed a common Maasai prayer is: "May the Creator give us cattle and children". The Maasai are passionate about their herds and take great pains to ensure their increase-by means fair or foul.

They also keep other low status livestock such as sheep, goats and chicken, and donkeys for use as pack animals. Farming, a sedentary lifestyle, and the implied loss of freedom to wander the fields bequeathed by enkai, are frowned upon as unworthy of such an honourable people.

The Maasai are generally splendid specimen, who revere physical beauty and wear such adornments as to enhance it. You will find them bedecked with heavy handmade bead jewellery, and their elongated earlobes dangling with beads and shapely objects. They also wear large disks or single strand beaded necklaces, anklets, wristlets, headbands, waistbands, and rings. And for those who cannot see all this, they attach small metallic pieces to their clothes that chime as they walk along.

Bright red is by far the Maasai's favourite colour. In traditional regalia, the young warriors dress in short crimson wrap-skirts and smear their hair with red ochre. The elderly men dress in long red wrap-robos and sash in red shukka –blankets, while the women dress in colourful clothing, red being the dominant shade. Blue is the colour every married woman has to wear to attract enkai's blessing of children. Green is the colour of blessing, like the grass for their cattle.

The Maasai are keen about hair and skin. But only three categories of people are allowed to wear hair: an unnamed child, a barren woman and a moran –warrior. Warriors spend good time braiding their hair; they then apply red ochre, which they also use to embellish their skin. Such grooming is invaluable in attracting girlfriends at this stage of their life.

Song and dance is a part of the living culture, and Maasai's perform a dance at every ceremony and sometimes for mere entertainment. Adorned in huge beaded neck disks, the women move rhythmically and lithely as the men make sudden vertical leaps to amazing heights of up to 5 ft off the ground. Usually after the evening meal, families gather round a fire and tell stories and myths, then round off the night with some dance and chanting.

Among the Maasai, childbirth is an occasion of great joy. The newborn is given a nickname, until about six months when the child undergoes its first ritual –embarnoto e nkerai, which is an equivalent of christening. The child's head is shaven clean, and thereafter given a proper name.

At about the age of five – ten years, girls and boys are separated and each trained according to gender expectations. The boys learn to herd cattle as the girls are taught to be useful around the homestead. This period is challenging for the boy child, as he begins to spend days away from his mother. In the macho Maasai culture, it is believed that having a boy hanging around his mother for long may pulp his character.

On the contrary, the girls are expected to keep even closer to their mothers, from whom they learn crucial life skills. One important thing she must learn is to build a manyatta –the Maasai traditional house. This house is loaf shaped, built with closely woven sticks and sealed with grass and leaves. The structure is then plastered with fresh cow-dung and urine mixed with clay, creating a hard cement-like shell.

The hut is usually low, smoky and dark inside, though small holes are punctured on the sides for ventilation. It takes months to build one and this task is specifically reserved for women. 10-20 manyattas built to form a circle make a homestead, accommodating more than one family and a cattle Kraal. Meat, milk and blood form a substantial portion of the Maasai diet. They rely on cattle, goats and sheep for this. Using a bow, a blunt arrow is shot at a live cow's jugular to extract blood. Animal fats, honey, porridge and recently maize meal, vegetables and tea are also consumed.

Circumcision - emurata –is the most significant ceremony in the early years of a Maasai's life, as it marks the transition from childhood to adulthood. The night before the main ceremony, the boys sing and play their childhood away. Those who undergo circumcision at the same time henceforth belong to the same age-set.

An age-set is formed every seven to ten years, accommodating boys of 7 to 14 years of age. On the morning of the ceremony, each boy is bathed in stinging-cold water to deaden his nerves. He is draped in a purple piece of clothing and is presented with a special pair of shoes made from dry cow-hide. In a public ceremony, in the chill of the morning, the foreskin of his penis is knifed off. During this ritual the boy must not show the slightest sign of pain, not even the twitch of a muscle.

Girls undergo an excision of the clitoris – clitoridectomy, which is performed when they are much older in the privacy of their mother's house. To stop profuse bleeding, a paste of cow dung and milk fat is applied on the raw wound. It is believed that this infamous practice helps keep the girls' sexual desires in check.

The girl after healing is considered eligible for marriage and any worthy suitor may now ask for her hand. The Maasai bride is usually never part of the dowry negotiation or wedding arrangement. Sometimes it is a childhood engagement. After payment of dowry, at an agreed date, the groom accompanied by his best mate arranges to pick his betrothed.

After various ceremonies, she is clothed in blue to symbolise her new status. As a married woman, she will now always walk behind her husband.

After the boys heal, initiation into junior warriorhood follows in a colourful ceremony known as emurano. The boys move from home and set up warriors' camps –emanyatta, away from family where they live wild and begin to grow their hair. The age-set chums are now taught and prepared to be true warriors- morani. Matters of herd and community security now rest in their youthful hands.

The morani are eager to justify their new status by raiding cattle belonging to non-Maasai communities. It is at this stage that they also learn the art of lion hunting. The authorities today take a very dim view of lion hunting and the Maasai grumble that those caught in the practice are punished. During this period, the junior warrior is allowed to engage in sexual relations with uncircumcised girls, provided no pregnancy results. He shares his girlfriends with his age-set mates as they are bound by oath for life and share in everything. They are prohibited to eat in the presence of women or when unaccompanied by their age-set friends. They also must carry their weapons at all times; a spear – with a pale coloured handle, a club and a shield.

Junior warriors must be on the ready to fight fearlessly, at any time. If they prove themselves, they are promoted to senior warrior –ilingeetiani, through a huge ceremony known as eunoto, which is performed every ten to fifteen years. The ilingeetiani cease to be front-liners in battle and prepare for elderhood. They are allowed to accumulate wealth, marry and start families. At the transition ceremony, they are handed new spears with ebony handles to signify their seniority. They can now eat outside the camp but still not in the company of women. Here, they identify and choose their age-set leader.

The warrior graduates to become a junior elder at an emotional, meat roasting ceremony -olngeher. Crying and wailing, he mourns the end of his youthful years. He downs his weapons and is honoured with an elders' chair. The chair becomes his companion till death or until it breaks. On this chair his eldest wife shaves his head clean. If he has no wife, his mother does the honours, and a wife is very soon found for him.

Days later, the ceremony comes to an end when there is no more meat to roast. Now as elders, they must move out of their father's homesteads and establish their own. They begin to involve themselves in deliberating other concerns of the community. With time they become senior elders- revered wise men, and assume responsibilities of clan administration.

Death - enkeeya is the inevitable end of a Maasai's life journey. To the horror of Christian missionaries, Maasai traditionally mourned their dead then left the body in the wild for animals to eat. The common practice now is to hold a small ceremony, after which a grave is dug and the body buried. Stones are then piled upon the grave, but without any tombstones or no markers.

Today, an approximately 450,000 Maasai live in Kenya, with a similar number estimated to be living in Tanzania. They live in the neighbourhood of some of the leading game reserves. Maasai regions such as Serengeti, Ngorongoro, Maasai Mara, Amboseli, and Tarangire are abundant with the wild game that makes safari tourism such fun.

In these areas conflicts occasionally arise between the interests of the Maasai and those of wildlife. The Maasai complain that though their animals are sometimes attacked by wildlife, any retaliation results in punishment by the authorities. Though they are allowed to graze animals in game reserves, this is not allowed in national parks such as Amboseli, limiting available pasture for their beloved cattle.

The loss of communal Maasai lands to agricultural and commercial utilisation has further piled up pressure on the Maasai traditional lifestyle. Though they have survived through the last century, the pressure to adapt modern lifestyles is relentless. They have stuck to their arguably antiquated customs with an obstinacy that defies all understanding. Though some are yielding, many continue with the ways of the past.

Their way of life puts them at a severe disadvantage in the modern world that surrounds them. The Kenyan and Tanzanian governments - and the colonial administrators before them, have failed to woo the Maasai away from their traditional lifestyle. In 1988, warriorhood customs were banned in Kenya; a few other practices have also been prohibited but are still practiced in secret. Female circumcision remains the greatest battle ahead, which the Maasai – especially the older women refuse to abandon.

The Maasai appear poor on account of their simple lifestyle, so lacking in modern conveniences. Some have however huge cattle herds worth a substantial amount. But they rarely sell the cattle, and the accumulation of cattle wealth is almost an end in itself.

The Maasai have resisted modern education, and to integrate in the cash economy. In Kenya, Maasai literacy rates are below 20%, and fall as low as 5% among clans pursuing a purely nomadic lifestyle. Due to their semi-nomadic ways, it is not easy to provide essential services such as safe drinking water, healthcare, education facilities, electricity and telephones. But some have taken with relish to mobile telephony, so well suited to their mobile ways.

In recent years efforts have been made to accommodate the Maasai in eco-tourism activities, including revenue sharing in “group ranches”. With a Maasai guide, you can tour the villages, meet the people and get to know how they live. From their guests, they expect respect for their privacy and environment, and sensitivity about their culture. Filming and taking pictures without consent is considered disrespectful.

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